

# Congress of the United States

## Washington, DC 20515

April 25, 2005

The Honorable Ralph Regula  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Labor,  
Health and Human Services, and  
Education  
Committee on Appropriations

The Honorable David R. Obey  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Labor,  
Health and Human Services, and  
Education  
Committee on Appropriations

Dear Chairman Regula and Ranking Member Obey:

As members committed to sound science and the strengthening of our nation's public health infrastructure, we are writing to convey our overwhelming concern with the current level of federal funding for abstinence-unless-married programs appropriated through the Labor, Health and Human Services and Education spending bill. We are urging that you reduce funding for community-based abstinence-unless-married programs from the current level of \$105 million to \$21.7 million, which is the level the program was originally funded at in 2001 (\$20million, adjusted for inflation). Furthermore, we urge you to dedicate the savings to chronically underfunded public health programs such as the Title X family planning program, Ryan White care and prevention initiatives, breast and cervical cancer screening and treatment programs, and STD prevention programs. In addition, we strongly urge that steps be taken to ensure that federally-funded programs provide medically accurate information to our nation's young people.

Although there is a striking lack of evidence that abstinence-unless-married education programs have a long-term beneficial impact on young people's behavior, federal funding has skyrocketed, while funding levels for other public health programs that provide primary health care services to underinsured and uninsured low income Americans have been stagnant at best. The additional \$39 million requested in the President's budget for community-based abstinence programs in FY 2006 would bring the total allocated for this program to \$438 million, an increase of over 600% since the community-based program was established in FY 01.

Especially given the tight budget year, federal funding should not continue to flow to programs that are ineffective and could actually jeopardize adolescent health.

Consider the following:

- Abstinence-unless-married programs are not supported by the vast majority of parents. A January 2004 poll from NPR/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard Kennedy School of Government showed that a majority of parents want abstinence to be a major piece of a sex education curriculum. However, only 15 percent of parents believed that schools should teach only about abstinence from sexual intercourse and should not provide information on condoms and contraception.
- Recent evaluations of state abstinence-unless-married programs show little success in changing teens' attitudes or behavior, and in some instances may even be harmful.. According to eleven evaluations of federally-funded programs (Arizona, Florida, Iowa, Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Texas), abstinence-only programs show little evidence of sustained, long-term impact on adolescents' attitudes favoring abstinence, teens' intentions to abstain, or teen rates of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.
- Further, the information conveyed to young people in these programs is often incomplete and/or inaccurate, which poses a threat to adolescent health. Education is one of our most powerful prevention tools, yet

abstinence-only programs censor information about contraception. And even in programs utilizing curricula that don't contain inaccuracies, information is effectively censored. Under program requirements, educators are forced to withhold vital information about pregnancy and disease prevention from our young people. The only information about contraception that can be discussed is failure rates. Current law sets forth specific messages to be taught, including that sex outside of marriage – for people of any age – is likely to have harmful physical and psychological effects.

- A study released by Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA) in December 2004 confirmed that many federally-funded abstinence-unless-married education curricula used by community-based organizations contain false, misleading, and distorted information about the risks of sexual activity. The Waxman study reviewed 13 of the most commonly used abstinence-only sex education curricula in the United States and found that 11 of the programs -- which are used by 69 organizations in 25 states -- contain unproven claims and basic scientific errors.

Examples of misinformation contained in federally-funded curricula include:

- Touching a person's genitals can result in pregnancy.
  - Mutual masturbation can cause pregnancy.
  - HIV can be transmitted by tears and sweat.
  - Condoms fail to prevent HIV transmission as often as 31 percent of the time in heterosexual intercourse, and 50 percent of gay teens has AIDS.
  - A pregnancy occurs one out of every seven times that couples use condoms.
  - A 43-day-old fetus is a "thinking person."
  - Five to ten percent of women will never again be pregnant after having a legal abortion.
  - Suicide is a consequence of premarital sex.
- Virginity pledges do not work. Teenagers who take virginity pledges are almost as likely to be infected with a sexually transmitted disease as those who never made the pledge, according to an eight-year study published in the March 2005 *Journal of Adolescent Health*. Although some young people who sign a virginity pledge may delay the initiation of sexual activity for an average of 18 months, they are also less likely to use condoms and less likely to obtain treatment for STIs raising significant health concerns. Moreover, those teens who keep their pledges to remain "virgins" are more likely to experiment with risky behaviors such as oral and anal sex than non-pledgers.
  - Some abstinence-unless-married programs have raised serious constitutional and civil liberties concerns. In July 2002, a federal court enjoined Louisiana's federally funded abstinence-unless-married program, holding that the program habitually funded projects that conveyed religious messages in violation of the constitution.

Unfortunately, abstinence-unless-married programs ignore clear realities and continued increases in federal funding for ineffective programs is short-sighted. Nationally, 90 percent of Americans engage in sex by age 25 and over 60% of young people will have had sexual intercourse before graduating from high school. In addition, 900,000 women younger than 20 become pregnant each year and 80 percent of these pregnancies are unintended. In regard to STDs, half of the 40,000 new cases of HIV infection in the U.S. every year occur in young people under the age of 25, yet abstinence-unless-married programs deny information to young people about contraceptive methods proven to help prevent the transmission of many sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.

These statistics suggest that programs should recognize both parental hopes and societal reality. Major medical organizations such as the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, strongly believe in teaching young people about both abstinence and contraception.

What is lost in the political debate is that abstinence for young people is a public health message we *all* support -- but that message should not trump or distort public health information that protects adolescents' health. Once again, we urge you to reevaluate the current level of funding for abstinence-unless-married programs in the Labor-HHS appropriations bill and urge changes to ensure that program teach medically accurate information

Sincerely,

Raúl M. Grijalva  
Rep. Raúl M. Grijalva

Lois Capros

Melanie M. M. M.

Dennis J. Kucinich

Michael E. Caputo

Eddie Bernice Johnson

Jenny K. Davis

Tim Van Hollen

Gus Carney

Ellen Ocasio

Ellen Ocasio

Barbara Lee  
Rep. Barbara Lee

Gregory M. Meeks

Hilda L. Solis

Julie Carson

Neil Ghermonovich

Kiana McIntosh

Dora DeHette

Jessie Davis

Letitia Sanchez

John F. Tierney

Jim McDermott

Stephen Publico  
Tanny Balchiri

Phil Miller

Jim Hudson  
~~John Miller~~  
Hoyt D. Oyster

John F. Tierney  
Tom Lantos

Walter Dindig  
Phil Johnson  
Lewie Slaughter  
Maxine Waters  
Mrs V. Gutierrez

John J. Sarny  
Ruth Holt

Gene Israel  
Charles A. Fogarty  
Pete Stark  
Robert Wexler

Diane E. Watson

John C. Goss  
Bernie H. Grosse

Corrine Brown  
Sherrod Brown  
Jerrold Nadler  
Lynn Woolsey

Frank Moore  
Evan

Lane Evans

Harry A. Wapman  
Peter A. Fyfe  
Sam Fane

Jane Hamman

Edijal E. Cummings

Carolyn B. Molyneux

George Miller

Michael M. M.

Edward J. Mankin

Jim M.